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The Negative Politics in Augustine's *The City of God*

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Abstract

This essay attempts to study the negative features of politics in Augustine's *The City of God* (*De Civitate Dei*). Augustine is not an anarchist who believes that the state and the authority are an irreplaceable tool to maintain peace. However, Augustine's thought has no place in the vision of a politics of perfection, in which all-wise rulers devise truly good and lasting solution for social problems and in which contented subjects live together in stable harmony. Politics is a realm in which fallible, sinful men work out imperfect, precarious solutions to recurring difficulties and tension. He thinks state and coercive are a result of human sinfulness. All coercive power like the institutions of property and slavery, was a divinely sanctioned remedy and punishment for sin. Augustine also made a new definition of the "Republic". He leaves just out of his definition of the republic entirely and to accept a minimalist and amoral description.

Key words: Sin; Remedy; Punishment; Justice; Love

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INTRODUCTION

The age in which St. Augustine lived was a period of profound disturbances, marking the transition from the classical civilization of Greece and Rome to the Christian civilization of Western Europe. Augustine, heir

to the classical civilization of Western Europe and great Christian philosopher and theologian, is the between the thought of antiquity and that of the Middle Ages; indeed, he can be regarded as an important link between classical culture and the Christian civilization which, having dominated Europe from the fifth century until our own times, may now be coming to its end. Therefore, to discuss the political theory of Augustine is necessary for theoretical and empirical value.

One view is that in Augustine's view politics are negative: State and coercive social power is based neither on nature nor on justice; it is rather a condition of slavery caused by sin. Augustine sees political life as such as a part of the good creation of God, but political authority is not based on this inherent goodness of social life. The typical representatives of this view are Brown and Markus. Brown thinks that civil life requires obedience; and since, at least in practice, that involves domination, the view Augustine takes of this matter is "strictly analogous to Augustine's view of illness" (Brown, 1965, pp.1-21). Markus holds the same view:

Because civil institutions are a necessary response to sin, they are not something natural in the full sense; in the end civil life is theologically neutral and serves ephemeral ends; it constitutes "an area of intrinsically" between the City of God and the City of this world. (Markus, 1970, p.64)

On the contrary, another view is that politics are positive in Augustine's thought: Politics itself is good, and is in accord with human nature. This view which was represented by Burnell and Heyking. Burnell believes that civil society is the chief natural organ of voluntary action. In this respect, too, Augustine is highly classical. Heyking thinks that political life as the mode by which human beings satisfy their longings for a kind of wholeness, which political society serves as a kind of microcosm of the way its citizens perceive reality. "The political city is the best practical regime as understood and governed by natural reason" (Heyking, 2003, p12).

The author believes that the latter view can make up for the deficiency of the previous view to a certain extent. However, politics is generally negative in Augustine's thought, so the latter explanation already deviated from Augustine's thought. This essay will elaborate on the negative features of Augustine's political thought in several aspects.

1. WHY THE STATE IS NECESSARY?

The central theme of Augustine's realistic political theory is that state exists to maintain earthly peace so that men can live and work together and attain the objects that are necessary for their earthly existence. "Peace" is an important concept in *The City of God* Augustine. Augustine points to be a "well-ordered concord" in which obedience follows from a rational conception of permanent and mutual interests and not from fear and repression. "The peace of all things lies in the tranquility of order and order is the disposition of equal and unequal things in such a way as to give to each its proper place" (*The City of God*, 19:13).

Augustine thinks that, on the basis of nature of human beings, all men have some longing for peace. A clear distinction remains in Augustine's considered between the peace of the God's city and the terrestrial city. The peace of the terrestrial city is based on "libido dominance" and subjection of the people. Therefore, that peace has the characteristic of lust perverts the good order of nature. On the contrary, the peace of the city of God is perfect peace, and it is an object of Christian hope. However, the citizen of God's city, in its pilgrimage, is intermingled in this world with the citizens of the opposite of the terrestrial city. Some kind earthly peace, at least a minimum of social order, is a realizable goal and aim to the citizens both of the city of God and the terrestrial city. "For the time being, however, it is advantageous to us also that this people should have such peace in this life; for, while the two cities are intermingled, we also make use of the peace of Babylon by faith, so that it is only for a while that we are pilgrims in her midst" (Ibid.). The earthly peace is of common concern to all, whether citizens of the heavenly or earthly cities.

Therefore, "peace" is an area where coercive institutions can function. Augustine points this out from the fact that all men desire peace, and without authority there can be no peace as even the wicked man knows. "He employs harsh measures to impose upon his household a peace which, he believe, cannot exist unless all the other members of the society are subject to one head; and this head, in his own house, is himself" (*The City of God*, 19:12). Moreover the rule of authority is so requisite as to be indispensable, and those that would do away with the just rule of God must substitute a rule of their own, unjust though it is. "Thus, pride is a perverted imitation of God.

For pride hates a fellowship of equality under God, and wishes to impose its own dominion upon its equals, in place of God's rule" (Ibid.).

The necessity of coercive authority is further manifested by the order and law which obtain in heaven and on earth. Augustine describes how there is an order permeating the world:

The peace of the body, therefore, lies in the balanced ordering of its parts; the peace of the irrational soul lies in the rightly ordered disposition of the appetites; the peace of the rational soul lies in the rightly ordered life and health of a living creature; peace between mortal man and god is an ordered obedience, in faith, under an eternal law; and peace between men is an ordered agreement of mind with mind. The peace of a household is an ordered concord, with respect to command and obedience, of those who dwell together; the peace of a city is an ordered concord with respect to command and obedience, of the citizens; and the peace of the Heavenly City is a perfectly ordered and perfectly harmonious fellowship in the enjoyment of God and of one another in God. (*The City of God*, 19:13)

Though Augustine in this passage is speaking of order in the universe, and says nothing directly of authority, yet we must observe that the two concepts are inseparable. Where in order, there must also be authority, that is to say an agent with power to order. Augustine recognizes an order, an authority, in the family, in the state, in man himself, in fact underlying and permeating the universe. So extensive is this order that he will let none escape its influence; not even those who cut themselves off from its peace and tranquility. "Precisely because of their misery, however, even they cannot be said to lie beyond the sphere of order; for they are miserable deservedly and justly" (Ibid.).

2. THE STATE IS THE RESULT OF THE FALL OF HUMANITY

According to classical political thinkers, such as Aristotle, it is "by nature" that man is political animal. Aristotle argues that it is our nature to govern and be governed, and that any creature of whom this is not true is either greater than human or less than human (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a25). This is so because our moral goodness can be completed only in and through the formative processes that life in a political community makes possible. Politics is therefore called the "master science": The science means that almost everything happens in political context, that the decisions of the *polis* (the Greek city-state) governed most other things. For Augustine, by contrast, the master science is theology, and theology, as based on the Bible, tells us that the domination and slavery of human being were not part of God's plan in creating the world. His intention was that individuals should govern themselves by the light given to them by Him in whose image they were made. God gave to Adam "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of

the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth”; but

He did not intend that His rational creature, made in His own image, should have lordship over the beasts, Hence the first just men were established as shepherds of flocks, rather than as kings of men. This was done so that in this way also God might indicate what the order of nature requires, and what the desert of sinners demand. For we believe that it is with justice that a condition of servitude is imposed on the sinner. That is why we do not read the word “slave” anywhere in the Scriptures until Noah the just man, punished his son’s with this name. [...] By nature, then, in the condition in which God first created man, no man is the slave either of another man or of sin. But it is also true that servitude itself is ordained as a punishment by that law which enjoins the preservation of the order of nature, and forbids its disruption. For if nothing had been done in violation of that law, there would have been no need for the discipline of servitude as a punishment. The apostle therefore admonishes servants to be obedient to their masters and to serve them loyally and with a good will, so that, if they cannot be freed by their masters, they can do this by serving not with cunning fear, but in faithful love, until all unrighteousness shall cease, and all authority and power be put down, that God may be all in all. (*The City of God*, 19:15)

This passage clearly shows that human beings are free and equal in their original condition. Neither the need nor the wish to be involved in political relationships is a defining part of what it is to be human. When the Bible tells us that man was made “in the image of God”, this plainly does not mean that he resembles God in appearance. It means that he was made as a rational creature. Equality is the condition natural to human beings because it is the condition appropriate to creatures who share in the Divine property of reason.

According to classical political philosophy, human beings are naturally unequal. The true function of the state or government is to make men into better men so that the better and the more developed. In the political of Plato, the stronger part of a society should benefit the weaker part, the ruler serve the people. Cicero puts forward a similar idea of the natural right of rule: kings, magistrates, commanders, and senators govern the citizens as God rules man, the mind governs the body, and reason rules lusts—this is Cicero’s definition of justice. The right of the superior in ability, wisdom, virtue, and wealth to rule the inferior is objectively based on the law of nature on a small scale in the family and on a larger scale in the commonwealth.

Do we not observe that dominion has been granted by nature to everything that is best, to the great advantage of what is weak? For why else does God rule over man, the mind over the body, and reason over lust over the body, and also lust; but it rules over the body as a king governs his subjects or a father his children, whereas it rules over lust as a master rules his slaves, restraining it and breaking its power. So kings, commanders, magistrates, senators, and popular assemblies govern citizens as the mind governs the body. (*De rep.* 3:25)

In contrast, Augustine would say that coercive political power structures exist, not by spiritual nature, but sin.

Human beings are sociable creatures by nature, but they are not naturally. All forms of rule came into being after the fall. If Adam had not fallen, coercive authority would not have arisen. It would not have arisen because the psychological forces that generate and sustain political activity would have been absent. Life in political society, in subjection to rulers and coercive institutions is—like slavery and other forms of dominion—the result of man’s fall, and its purpose is to limit the disorder and conflict attendant upon it. On this view, the coercive power is concerned, not to help man to achieve the right order, but to minimise disorder. As Carlyle pointed out,

Man is by nature made for society. But it is not by nature that man is the lord of man, it is not by nature that man is in subjection to man. [...] The government of man by man is not part of the natural order of the world. In another place St Augustine speaks in the severest terms of the desire for domination, and treats it as arising from an intolerable pride which forgets that men are each others’ equal. (Carlyle, 1903, p.126)

On the one hand, the state originates from the fall of mankind, so the state can be regarded as a punishment. On the other hand, the state can also be used to prevent human beings from committing more crimes, so the state is also a remedy. Although coercive power is neither natural nor just, God, however, can use it for good purposes, for the restriction of social abuses. Before the Fall, the most and the deterioration and disturbance of that creation by sin. Before the Fall, the most beautiful crown of God’s creative activity in the human world was the peace and order of social life; correspondingly, the most detestable evil in the world is caused by the perversion of that good: “For the human race is, more than any other species, at once social by nature and quarrelsome by perversion” (*The City of God*, 12:28).

Human beings have never lost their desire for peace.

The earthly city, which does not live by faith, desires an earthly peace, and it establishes an ordered concord of civic obedience and rule in order to secure a kind of co-operation of men’s wills for the sake of attaining the secure a kind of co-operation of men’s will for the sake of attaining the things which belong to this mortal life. (*The City of God*, 19:17).

Because of the distorted wills and loves of the human being, and the conflicts that arise among them, the objects of state or government must be limited.

Although the establishment of state and government is caused by sin, God does not will to abolish it until the end of this “saeculum”. Coercive social power is a part of the penal existence of mankind; and furthermore, it is a remedy for sin, a means by which God limits the disaster of total social chaos which would be the case if everyone could freely maximize his lust for rule. The business of government is not the promotion of the good life, or virtue, or perfection, but the more modest task of cancelling out at least some of the effects of sin. Its function, summarily stated, is to resolve some of the

tensions in society and to contain those that cannot be resolved. In the condition of radical insecurity—"this hell on earth"—political authority exists "to safeguard security and sufficiency". All the institutions of political and judicial authority and their administrative and coercive agencies serve this object: That the wicked be held in check and the good given a space to live in innocence (Burns, 1988, p.148).

3. AUGUSTINE'S REDEFINITION OF "REPUBLIC"

The negative understanding of politics is also reflected in the removal of justice from the definition of the Republic. Augustine introduces at length in the second book of *The City of God* the political thought of Cicero, quoting those parts of Cicero's *De re publica* where Roman author puts forward an argument that without "iustitia" no "res public" can exist. This is an idea which Cicero shares with Plato, in his *Republic* Plato is of the opinion that justice is not only the foundation of a commonwealth, but justice itself can become a reality only in a political state. Augustine describes Cicero's argument further by representing the popular opinion, expressed in Cicero's work by Philus, that some injustice is inevitable in the government of any state. But in spite of that, the real foundation of political society is justice.

Using Scipio as his mouthpiece, Cicero establishes his position, according to which it is not possible to rule a state without justice. According to Cicero, complete justice is the supreme essential for government.

Now Scipio, at the end of the second book, says: Among the different sounds of lyres or flutes and the voices of singers, a certain harmony must be maintained which the cultivated ear cannot bear disrupted or discordant; and such harmony, concordant and consistent, may be brought about by the balancing of even the most dissimilar voices. So too, when the highest, lowest and, between them, the intermediate orders of society are balanced by reason as though they quite dissimilar elements. What musicians call harmony in singing is concord in the city, which is the most artful and best bond of security in the commonwealth, and which, without justice, cannot be secured at all. (*The City of God*, 2:21)

After representing the above dialogue, Augustine turns Cicero's proper definition of a republic. The basic assumption is that the concept of political society must be based on the idea of the well-being of the people. The definition of "Res publica" presumes the definition of "res populi". In fact, as we shall see, in *The City of God* Augustine fully agrees with Cicero on that the definition of a republic and commonwealth is based on the concept of the common good of a people.

With Scipio as his mouthpiece, Cicero gives his fundamental definition of political society:

Scipio returns to his interrupted theme and recalls and commends his own brief definition of a commonwealth, which

he had said to be "the property of a people". "A people" he defines as being not every assembly of a multitude, but an assembly united in fellowship by common agreement as to what is right and by a community of interest. (Ibid.)

According to Augustine's interpretation of Cicero, the idea of justice is the fundamental constituent of the definition of the concept of a people and thus of a republic or commonwealth. Only justice can fulfill the requirement of "common agreement as to what is right and by a community of interest".

In his *De legibus* Cicero makes it clear that "iustitia" is the main requirement of the constitution of any commonwealth. He says that Plato was right when he condemned the man who first separated utility from justice. Without the idea of eternal natural justice, law is nothing but products of human opinions which run the risk of perversion and misuse. Justice is the basic condition, no matter whether the form of a commonwealth is a kingdom or an aristocratic or a democratic republic. Augustine in a very basic sense anchors Cicero's idea of political society in the fact of "iustitia" which must be a reality in the community in question. He explains the basic definition of Cicero:

He then explains the great advantage of definition in debate, and he infers from these definitions of his own that a commonwealth—that is, the property of people—exists when it is well and justly governed either by a single king, or by a few of the highest men, or by the people at large. But when the king is unjust (or a tyrant, as he put it, after the Greek fashion), or the highest men are unjust (he called a union of such men a "faction") or the people itself is unjust (in this case he found no term in current use; although he might have called the people itself a "tyrant" then the commonwealth is not mere flawed, as had been argued the day before. Rather, as the conclusions entailed by Scipio's definitions would indicate, it entirely ceases to be. For it could not be "the property of a people", he said, when a tyrant or a faction took possession of it. Moreover, the people itself would no longer be a people if it were unjust: For it would no longer answer to the definition of a people as a multitude united in fellowship by common agreement as to what is right and by a community of interest. (Ibid.)

It is very much in Augustine's interest to demonstrate that Cicero's line of argument ends in contradiction of itself. We saw how Augustine referred to Sallust in order to show how the Roman authors themselves admitted that the moral condition of the Roman republic was "utterly wicked and dissolute". Now Augustine refers with the same intention to Cicero, trying to demonstrate that Rome as miserable and looks back to the earlier history of Rome with nostalgia. Augustine, who does not share Cicero's or Sallust's nostalgia for the old virtues Rome, also has no belief in Imperial revival. Augustine reaches this drastic conclusion: Because true justice never had a place in Rome—on the contrary, Rome was founded on violence, fratricide, and lust for domination—a republic or a commonwealth in terms defined by Cicero never existed in Rome. "A commonwealth never existed,

because there never was true justice in the community” (Ibid.).

But this is not the end of the discussion. Augustine makes a promising remark: In spite of coming to a dead end with the definition of political society based on the concept of justice, “accepting more feasible definitions of a republic, I grant there was a republic of a certain kind.” Augustine gives a hint that he will present an alternative definition of political society, not based on the principle of justice, because true justice is a transcendental idea, not a concept appropriate for a definition of a people and a commonwealth. The definition of a commonwealth, must be based on premise other than the idea of true or absolute justice.

There was, of course, according to a more practicable definition, a commonwealth of a sort; and it was certainly better administered by the Romans of more ancient times than by those who have come after them. True justice, however, does not exist other than in that commonwealth whose Founder and Ruler is Christ. You may indeed call it a commonwealth if you like, for we cannot deny that it is “the property of a people”. But it this name, which has become familiar in other places and circumstances, is perhaps too remote from our customary manner of speaking, we can at least say that there is true justice in that City of which Holy Scripture says: Glorious things are spoken of thee. O City of God. (Ibid.)

In book 19 of *The City of God*, Augustine returns to the great discussion on the concept of republic with Ciceronian and finally, in book 19, 24, gives his own alternative basic definition. In the beginning of this second discussion with Cicero on the idea of republic, Augustine first repeats what he had said in book 2, 21, on the basis of Cicero’s definition, there never was a Roman republic because the property of the people, was never attained among the Romans. Thereafter Augustine repeats the kernel of Cicero’s definition:

If this is a true definition, however, there never was a Roman commonwealth, for the Roman state was never “the property of a people” which the definition requires a commonwealth to be Scipio defined a “people” as a multitude “united in fellowship by common agreement as to what is right and by a community of interest”. (Ibid.)

In Augustine’s interpretation of Cicero, “vera iustitia” is presupposed in every treatment of the concept of justice. Without true justice, no right or true laws could exist; right flows from the fountain of justice. Augustine lets his readers understand that the definition of commonwealth by Cicero also presumes such a transcendental idea of justice: “He explains what he means by ‘common agreement as to what is right’, showing that a commonwealth cannot be maintained without justice. Where therefore, there is no true justice there can be no right” (Ibid.). On the basis of this, Augustine concludes:

Where there is no true justice, then, there can be no association of men “united in fellowship by common agreement as to what is right”, and therefore no people according to the definition of Scipio or Cicero. And if there is no people then there is no

“property of people” but only a multitude of some kind, not worthy of the name of a people, and if therefore, a commonwealth is “the property of a people” and if there is no “people” where there is no “common agreement as to what is right” and if there is no right where there is no justice, then it follows beyond doubt that where there is no justice there is no commonwealth. (Ibid.)

Augustine’s line of interpretation is clear. The idea of “ius” in Cicero’s definition cannot but be based on the category of “vera iustitia”. According to the statement of the Roman author, people is defined by reference of the common sense of right and, therefore, to true justice; without true justice there is no people. Republic or Commonwealth is defined in terms of the property of the people. If there is no people, based on the common sense of right, there is no property of the people and, consequently, no commonwealth. If “vera iustitia” does not exist, the whole line of Cicero’s argumentation collapses, Augustine believes.

In book 19, 21 Augustine does not yet deepen the discussion on the nature of political society; instead he brings up his apologetic tendency in trying to prove that the realization of “iustitia” is possible only in the true *ordo amoris sub Deo*, not in a false religion which is vain idolatry based on the perverse order of love. Thus he sets his motive of the theology of creation, perfected as an eschatological reality, over and against Cicero’s political thought.

Augustine emphasizes that “iustitia” may have some relevance to human life as a soteriological reality in the right relation to God; so justice is primarily not a question of natural morality but a question of true religion. Without a right relationship with God no justice, and therefore, no commonwealth based on justice exists:

For if the soul does not serve God it cannot by any means govern the body justly, nor can human reason govern the vices. And if there is no justice in such a man, then it is beyond doubt that there is no justice in a collection of men consisting of persons of this kind. Here, then, there is not that “common agreement as to what is right” by which a multitude is made into a “people” whose “property” a commonwealth is said to be. (Ibid.)

So according to Augustine’s argumentation, it seems that accepting the Christian religion is the condition of for the realization of Cicero’s idea of the republic. Augustine expressly emphasizes the inseparable connection of *iustitia* with *civitas Dei*. Cicero’s idea of the Republic can become a reality only in terms of the city of God. But as this city is an object of faith and hope, even for a Christian *vera iustitia* is an eschatological reality which cannot be consummated on earth:

Thus, justice is found where the one supreme God rules an obedient City according to His grace, so that it sacrifices to none but him; and where, in consequence, the soul rules the body in all men who belong to that City and obey God, and the reason faithfully rules the vices in lawful order. In that city, both the individual just man and the community and people of the just live by faith, which works by love: By that love with which

a man loves God as God ought to be loved, and his neighbor as himself. But where there is not this justice, there certainly is no association of men united by a common agreement as to what is right and by a community of interest. And so there is no commonwealth; for where there is no "people", there is no "property of people". (*The City of God*, 19:23)

"Populus", people, is the concept chosen by Augustine for a definition of political society. Augustine accepts Cicero's principle according to which a definition of political society is rooted in an adequate definition of people. An idea of people's interest, "res populi". In this sense, Augustine is as positive as Cicero: The foundation of political society must be in accordance with the good of the people. But in his definition in book 19, 24, showing how his good should be understood, Augustine differs drastically from Cicero.

The novelty of Augustine's alternative definition of political society lies in his replacing Cicero's idea of "iuris consensus utilitatis communio" with the concept of love using the verb "diligere". Augustine understands political society as an association of rational beings bound together by a common agreement on the objects of their love:

If we are to discover the character of any people, we have only to examine what it loves. If it is an assembled multitude, not of animals but of rational creatures, and is united by a common agreement as to what it loves, then it is not absurd to call it "people" no matter what the objects of its love may be. (*The City of God*, 19:24)

The verb "diligere" which Augustine employs in his definition of political society does not mean loving a high ideal. Instead, it is a concept of collective love for gain. In his definition in book 19, 24, Augustine uses the verb, the sense being neutral. But in regard to what hitherto has been said of his gloomy view of political life in the penal situation of fallen mankind, it is more likely that Augustine's thought of love in this context is to be seen as non-idealistic, in relation to the condition of sin and its consequences which have disturbed the right order of love. According to Augustine, love is constitutive for the natural moral law as well. But because the doctrine of sin overwhelms his theological anthropology, Augustine understands the naturally good social life being heavily vitiated by sin. Love as a social phenomenon is by definition biased toward selfish love, an expression of collective selfishness. Neither benevolent love nor true justice, but such a love which is typical of the misery of social life, can be a foundation for a political society. There exists a remnant of the good *ordo naturae* in human life, but it has been put into turmoil by sin and is being misused by men for satisfying their own lust for rule.

CONCLUSION

Considered with respect to its origins and most typical purposes, the state is both a result of sin and a continuing

expression of sin. Like sickness, death and the other miseries of this world, it is a consequence of the fall. It expresses the change effected in human nature and the human will by the self-love of Human ancestor. The state is not, as it had been for Plato and Aristotle, a natural part of human life, nor is it a place for the realization of human character and potential. Augustine's keen sense of the perpetual power of human pride and sinfulness compelled him to reject any hope that the future would bring enduring peace or progress. Both his theological beliefs and his experience and observation of men's actions in an age of disorder enforced upon him an attitude of pessimistic realism, which would not allow him to sentimentalize or evade the darker aspects of social and political life. The business of government is not the promotion of the good life, or virtue, or perfection, but the more modest task of cancelling out at least some of the effects of sin. Its function, summarily stated, is to resolve some of the tensions in society and to contain those that cannot be resolved. In the condition of radical insecurity—"this hell on earth"—political authority exists "to safeguard security and sufficiency". All the institutions of political and judicial authority and their administrative and coercive agencies serve this object: that the wicked be held in check and the good given a space to live in innocence (Burns, 1988, p148).

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